

Editorial Introduction: The Erotics of Asexualities and Nonsexualities: Intersectional Approaches

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This special issue is fueled by the growth, involvement, and excitement stemming out of asexual community organizing, scholarship, and friendships. Since David Jay created the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN) in 2001, asexuality groups have blossomed both online and offline across the world. One would be hard-pressed to find a part of the world where people do not identify as asexual and seek out asexual knowledge and community, including in nations as far-reaching as China, Poland, the United States, Canada, Iran, and Brazil. AVEN's early definition of asexuality as "experiencing little or no sexual attraction to others" has been affirmed, challenged, expanded, and complexified over the past two decades of asexual community organizing, with many identifying as not only asexual but also gray asexual, demisexual, aroace, reciprosexual, aceflux, and beyond. Asexuals are now represented in television shows (such as *BoJack Horseman*, *Shadowhunters*, and *Sirens*) and in young adult literature (such as Claire Kann's *Let's Talk About Love* and Kathryn Ormsbee's *Tash Hearts Tolstoy*), and greater visibility has increased general literacy around asexuality. Asexuality is also becoming more and more integrated into LGBTQ₂IA+ organizations and spaces, with pressure for the A of the acronym to stand for asexual and aromantic and to be included under the queer umbrella. Recent years have also seen aromanticism burgeoning as an identity that challenges commitments to romantic modes of relating and attraction, one that is distinct from asexuality. As with asexuality, multiple aromantic forms—including grayromantic, demiromantic, aroflux, and of course aroace—have developed.

Asexuality studies, which we understand broadly as the interdisciplinary field of asexuality-affirming scholarship, has likewise played a role in building knowledge and community. Across disciplines, asexuality studies affirms that asexuality is valid and prolific in the face of the undermining and disbelieving of its legitimate claim to being a sexual orientation and identity. Although visibility of and literacy around asexuality have increased, asexuality is too often still regarded as a form of repression, drawing on pseudo-psychoanalysis,

or it is pathologized as a medical problem in need of redress (Chasin 2015; Kim 2014; MacInnis and Hodson 2012). Such *asexphobia* (Kim 2014) draws attention to the ways in which asexuality is stigmatized and sexual relationships are elevated above other forms of relating and considered integral to happiness and well-being. Asexuality studies thus offers critiques of the interconnected systems that encourage sex and romance as relational modes prized over other forms of intimacies—an encouragement termed *sexusociety*, sex normativity or *sexualnormativity*, and/or *compulsory sexuality* by asexuality studies scholars (Carrigan 2011; Cerankowski and Milks 2010; Chasin 2011; Chasin 2013; Emens 2014; Gupta 2015; Hinderliter 2009; Przybylo 2011; Rich 1980). In this sense, asexuality studies asks not only for queer communities and society more broadly to accept asexuality but also demands that everyone take the concerns of asexuality seriously in how they think about their own modes of attraction and relationships. Thus, the contributions of asexuality studies matter to everyone, as they help us all question the compulsory nature of sex and romance as well as its uneven application across lines of ability, racialization, gender, age, and geographical context.

As the coeditors of this special issue, we are invested in and energized by this ever-developing scholarship and the challenges it poses to the compulsoriness of sex, sexuality, and romance. We both became interested in researching and writing about asexuality early in our academic careers: Ela Przybylo published her first piece on asexuality and sex-centralized society, or *sexusociety*, in 2011, and Kristina Gupta published her first piece on the constraining effect of the *sex for health* discourse, also in 2011. Nearly a decade later, academic work on asexuality is robust and has been published across academic fields as well in popular formats (i.e., Chen 2020; Decker 2016; Hills 2015). To briefly summarize some of the main themes in this scholarship: Researchers in psychology have examined asexuality as a sexual orientation, assessing its prevalence and its correlation with other psychological, biological, and behavioral variables (e.g., Antonsen et al. 2020; Bogaert 2004; Brotto et al. 2010; Chasin 2011; Chasin 2019; MacNeela and Murphy 2014). Scholars in sociology have studied the formation of online asexual communities and the identity formation of asexually identified individuals (e.g., Carrigan 2011; Gressgård 2013; Scherrer 2008; Scott and Dawson 2015; Vares 2018). And scholars in the humanities, particularly within feminist and queer studies, have analyzed the societal and theoretical assumptions about sexuality revealed by asexual community formation, employed asexuality as an analytical lens through which to examine texts, theories, and sociopolitical constructs, and used asexuality as a spur to imagine different forms of relationality and community (e.g., Barounis 2014; Cerankowski and Milks 2010; Cerankowski and Milks 2014; Fahs 2010; Hanson 2014; Przybylo 2013; Renninger 2015; Rothblum and Brehony 1993).

Yet despite this work over the last decade and the undeniable growth in both asexual and aromantic communities, it remains concerning how little queer and feminist studies has engaged with asexuality scholarship. Outside of feminist and queer work *on* asexuality, queer and feminist theory more broadly has yet to contend with including the voices of asexual (*ace*) and aromantic (*aro*) folks and thinking through the contributions of asexuality studies. As of yet, little work has been published directly on aromanticism (exceptions include Antonsen et al. 2020; zines by Mulder 2018 and yingchen and yingtong 2018; and theses by Elgie 2020, Lang 2018, and Stucki 2018), and the robust literature on asexuality remains sidelined in much feminist and queer scholarship.

Even more alarmingly, we have witnessed the theft of asexuality studies by queer studies scholars who use concepts such as compulsory sexuality and asexually based expansions of Audre Lorde's concept of *the erotic*, along with asexually grounded analysis more broadly, without attribution to asexuality studies scholars' careful and dynamic, if invisibilized, work. Drawing on the ideas of others, be they scholars or not, without acknowledgment constitutes what we would encourage our students to recognize as plagiarism. We have thus wondered, both in creating and thinking through this special issue, what makes it possible—even easy—for queer and feminist studies to fail to cite the contributions of asexuality studies?¹ What does it mean that after a decade of asexuality studies, asexuality remains largely invisible as such to many queer and feminist studies scholars? Why are queer and feminist scholars so hesitant to think *with* asexuality in imagining worlds that are more just, more *otherwise*, and that allow for the recognition of alternative worldmaking relationalities?

Our vision for this special issue is thus severalfold. We seek to use this space to invite those who have not yet engaged with the important contributions of asexuality studies to do so by critiquing the hierarchical systems that prioritize sexual relating as well as celebrating alternative modes of being together. Further, we hope that this special issue, along with the other work being done within asexuality studies, will remind feminist and queer scholars that they are *already* indebted to this field in how they think about the compulsoriness of sex, sexuality, and romance in western colonial sexusocial economies.

More specifically, looking at the title of this issue—"The Erotics of Asexualities and Nonsexualities: Intersectional Approaches"—we have several additional goals in mind. The first is attached to our use of the word *erotics*. As one of the editors of this issue argues, *erotics* presents a unique entryway to decentralizing sex in intimacy, one that is grounded in feminist, queer, lesbian, and antiracist thought, and specifically in the work of Audre Lorde ([1978] 1984; Przybylo 2019b). Although the *erotic*, *erotics*, and *eros* have been used variously across theoretical traditions, continuing to signify sexually, for example, in Freudian psychoanalysis (Freud [1905] 1975; Murphy 2019), drawing on a Lordean tradition the *erotic* is not bound to sex (Przybylo 2019b). In "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," Lorde questions a sexual model of the *erotic* as one grounded

in western, colonial, heterosexist, and patriarchal principles of relating (Lorde [1978] 1984; Przybylo 2019b). This is not to say that Lorde is not sex-positive, for as we know from her life and work, she was very much invested in the role of sex in lesbian antiracist community formation (De Veaux 2004; Lorde 1982). Nonetheless, Lorde's reformulation of the erotic establishes the erotic as a life force that fuels creative agency in the world. The erotic emerges as both a relational and solitary ground that accounts for the fullness of action done in the reflection of our true selves. Lorde wrote, memorably, that "dancing, building a bookcase, writing a poem, examining an idea" all constitute erotic expression ([1978] 1984, 57)—examples tied neither to romantic nor sex-based companionship. The erotic is fostered for Lorde through "sharing deeply any pursuit with another person" (56) and "the relationships that emerge as central for Lorde include deep friendships, care networks, circuits of friends and collaborators" (Przybylo and Jacob, forthcoming). Using this Lordean foundation, we hone an erotic approach to asexuality because it offers a model of intimacy that is tied neither to sex nor to romance but that rather gets at something deeper in the quality of what constitutes deep-flowing bonds and relationalities. Our goal in using the erotic as our starting point is thus to reground feminist and queer sexuality studies in an antiracist, intersectional model that is *also* attuned to and inclusive of nonsexual, asexual, nonromantic, aromantic, and queerplatonic modes of building intimacy and relating.

Our second goal for this issue is to place asexuality and nonsexualities in dialogue with one another. Drawing on one of the editor's formulations, nonsexuality is a term both related to and distinct from asexuality (Gupta 2013). Gupta (2013) argues for the use of asexuality to refer primarily to individuals and communities that self-identify with asexuality as a sexual orientation and identity. Nonsexuality, on the other hand, can look at literary, contemporary, and historical instantiations where sexual compulsion is not present, yet that do not necessarily signify as a sexual orientation in the way that asexuality does. For example, nonsexuality might refer to chosen celibacy, intimate relationships not based on sex, and/or the sexuality of people throughout history who may have been disinterested in sex but did not identify as asexual (Gupta 2013; Przybylo 2019b). Not surprisingly, some asexual activists have contested Gupta's formulation of asexuality and nonsexuality, either because they believe that pairing the term nonsexuality with asexuality suggests that the latter is not a sexual orientation or identity, or because they seek to create distance between, for example, asexuality as a sexual orientation and celibacy as a chosen behavior. In pairing the terms, we do not seek to undermine the validity of asexuality as identity; rather, we seek to make connections while simultaneously maintaining a distinction between asexuality as identity/orientation and other forms of sexual disinterest and disidentification. Certainly, this formulation of nonsexuality and asexuality is not intended to be absolute or universally useful. Asexuality has been used by asexuality studies both in capacious and specific

ways—for example, referencing asexuality as a sexual orientation and identity as well as more broadly looking at certain asexual ways of being that might not be recognized as asexual in any straightforward manner (e.g., Fahs 2010; Przybylo and Cooper 2014). Asexuality has also been usefully formulated in the plural by KJ Cerankowski and Megan Milks (2010) to account for a variety of meanings and expressions.

While each of the contributions to this special issue navigates the terrain of nonsexual and asexual in different ways, we emphasize that nonsexuality can help scholars reach at instances of sexual decentralization and/or disinterest without claiming them as asexual *per se*. Another goal for this issue is thus to place asexuality studies in conversation with nonsexualities. Some of our issue contributors do not work within asexuality studies, allowing for broader conversations on the importance of asexuality. Because asexuality offers unique perspectives on the gendered, raced, colonial, and ableist histories of sex, sexuality, romance, relating, and intimacy, it is vital that asexual theories be placed in dialogue with forms of nonsexuality, past and present. Considering nonsexuality broadly as including those areas where sex and sexuality are not central, are absent, or are questioned, it becomes possible to apply asexuality studies' unique contributions to other fields of study.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we hope that this issue will continue to foster intersectional approaches to asexuality. We use the term intersectionality to mark an approach to thinking about systems of oppression that has a strong lineage in Black feminist thought. According to Patricia Hill Collins and Valerie Chepp, “the first core idea of intersectional knowledge projects stresses that systems of power (e.g., race, gender, class, sexuality, ability, age, country of origin, citizenship status) cannot be understood in isolation from one another; instead, systems of power intersect and coproduce one another to result in unequal material realities and the distinctive social experiences that characterize them” (Collins and Chepp 2013, 60). Drawing on the work of the Combahee River Collective (1982), Audre Lorde ([1978] 1984), Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), and Patricia Hill Collins (1993), as well as the large body of work developed since, intersectionality provides an analytic that interrogates the complexity of social embodiments and is grounded in antiracism. Asexuality studies has drawn on intersectionality as an analytical lens from the start, particularly in regard to examining the ways in which systems of compulsory sexuality have been unevenly applied across lines of ability, racialization, gender, age, and geographical context. In particular, marginalized groups have been subject to both desexualization (the denial of their sexual desires as well as enforced abstinence) and hypersexualization (the exaggeration of their sexual desires as well as forced sexual activity) and often to both at the same time (Gupta 2015; Owen 2014; Kim 2010, 2014; Przybylo 2019b). This uneven application of compulsory sexuality has meant that asexuality as a sexual identity has different meanings and implications for different individuals and groups, depending

on their location within the intersecting systems of racism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, and colonialism. Scholars of asexuality thus explore questions of asexuality as well as sexual disidentification and disinterest as they relate to racialization, ability, gender, and geographic location.²

At the same time, there has also been an unmarked whiteness in much of the scholarship on asexuality, and asexual spaces can be white-dominated spaces, with asexuality misunderstood as a “white orientation—an identity that belong[s] to white people only” (Grace 2015). In addition, most of the scholarship on asexuality has focused on asexual communities in the global North and western contexts. With this special issue, we thus want to dismantle any links between an unmarked whiteness and asexuality while continuing to hone intersectional approaches to asexuality. The articles featured in this issue offer a particularly strong focus on asexuality in conversation with racialization and geographic location.

The pieces in this special issue address, in various ways, three specific foci: intersectional approaches to asexuality studies; dialogues between asexuality and other fields and between asexuality and nonsexualities; and framings of asexuality around *otherwise* ways of relating, erotics included. Before discussing the specific pieces included in these pages, it is worth noting the context in which this introduction was written and in which many of the pieces were reviewed, revised, and edited—a global pandemic leading to an economic recession, as well as nationwide protests in the United States against anti-Black police violence as well as against anti-Black racism more broadly. Although it is beyond the scope of this introduction to flesh out connections between this context and asexualities, we think that the two could be thought of productively together. On one hand, the need for social distancing has, in some cases, reduced avenues for interconnectivity. At the same time, as highlighted by the Black Lives Matter movement and other activism, the pandemic and recession have necessitated the (re)invigoration of community-based networks of care and support. Thus, any resources that foster thinking about relationality more capaciously and more creatively, including writing that centralizes asexual and aromantic experiences, are very much needed.

Turning now to the content of this special issue, its pages are animated by the art of Alex Farquhar, a disabled asexual artist whose piece “Wood and Fish” we first encountered at an art show co-curated by Heather Prost and Lauren Jankowski as part of the April 2019 “Unthinking Sex, Imagining Asexuality: Intersectional and Interdisciplinary Perspectives” conference.³ The image is not about asexuality in any obvious way as it is neither in the distinctive asexual pride colors of purple, white, gray, and black, nor does it use any obvious ace symbology. Yet we were drawn to the piece because it envisions community and sociality in soft and underspoken ways. Against a black backdrop, the gray and white minnows in the illustration are clustered together under a greenish-gray aura, swimming rightward through the orange reefs, with one fish turned

toward the left, yet not excluded. Without anthropomorphizing the fish, we were drawn to the illustration for its gentle approach to inclusion, belonging, and alternate intimacies. What if swimming was added to Audre Lorde's list of erotic fulfillment? Lorde did love swimming in lakes, after all ([1978] 1984, 57).

In the *Poesía* section, we include the work of five poets. Starting with Cameron Awkward-Rich and followed by Juan Miera, Sav Schlauderaff, Jo Teut, and Rebecca Ruth Gould, this section offers multiple visions for asexual and aromantic intimacies. It also works to bridge some of the gaps between feminist and queer asexuality studies and asexual grassroots and community organizing. Many of us who write on asexuality fall on the asexual spectrum and are involved in ace organizing and community, but there is nonetheless a schism between scholarly work on asexualities and ace and aro communities. Important popular books on asexuality, such as Angela Chen's *Ace: What Asexuality Reveals About Desire, Society, and the Meaning of Sex* (2020) and Julie Sondra Decker's *The Invisible Orientation: An Introduction to Asexuality* (2016), provide alternative publishing models for writing on asexuality, as do online essays and countless zines, including *Taking the Cake* by Maisha (2012), *Brown and Gray* by jnramos (2015), *An Aromantic Manifesto* by yingchen and yingtong (2018), and the Ace Zine Archive in general. Although this issue does not fully bridge the schism between scholarship and community, and some of the poets we feature are also scholars, we believe that by featuring five distinct poetic voices, our issue recalls some of the textures of an edited zine and presents opportunities for various forms of text-based engagement with asexual and aromantic identities and communities beyond scholarly modes of writing.

The peer-reviewed contributions to "The Erotics of Asexualities and Nonsexualities: Intersectional Approaches" begin with "Thinking Asexually: Sapin-Sapin, Asexual Assemblages, and the Queer Possibilities of Platonic Relationalities," in which Theresa Kenney radically rethinks both asexual cake symbology as well as asexuality more broadly from a Pilipinx/Filipinx perspective. Placing Pilipinx studies and asexuality studies in dialogue with one another, Kenney elucidates that many diasporic communities, and Pilipinx communities in particular, hone modes of kinship and relating that are not attached to compulsory sexuality and that instead foster forms of intimacy that are not sexual and are asexual. Following on this, Anna Kurowicka, in "The only story I will ever be able to tell: Nonsexual Erotics of Friendship in Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* and Tana French's *The Likeness*," looks at the genre of crime novels through an asexual lens intent on detecting asexual and aromantic forms of friendship bonds in this little-considered genre. It is worth noting that both Kenney's and Kurowicka's pieces touch and draw on aromanticism, as very little scholarly work has thus far explored aromanticism: except for one article (Antonsen et al. 2020), several theses (Elgie 2020; Lang 2018; Stucki 2018), at least two zines (Mulder 2018; yingchen and yingtong 2018), and many online articles (e.g., Borresen 2018; Neal 2016), scant research

focuses on aromanticism. Indeed, none of the pieces in this special issue focus solely on aromantic perspectives, identities, or communities. This limitation results directly from our call for papers (CFP) framing, which did not explicitly call for an engagement with aromanticism.⁴ Nevertheless, we hope that this issue can motivate scholarship engaging directly with aromanticism, aromantic identities and communities, and the limiting system of amatonormativity that encourages coupling at the price of friendships and other forms of relating (Brake 2012; Wilkinson 2012).

In “[T]he happiest, well-feddest wolf in Harlem’: Asexuality as Resistance to Social Reproduction in Claude McKay’s *Home to Harlem*,” Justin Smith reads a *Black Ace politics* from the 1928 Harlem Renaissance novel that he defines as a resistance to the foundational element of capitalism that is social reproduction. According to Smith, this resistance to social reproduction represents a version of Lordean erotics. Following on this, Day Wong and Xu Guo, in “Constructions of Asexual Identity in China: Intersections of Class, Gender, Region of Residence, and Asexuality,” perform a close reading of the narratives of three asexually identified residents of China. Wong and Guo argue that these three stories demonstrate the ways in which class, gender, and region of residence intersect to shape the type of asexual identity available to particular individuals. In “Intimacy Beyond Sex: Korean Television Dramas, Nonsexual Masculinities, and Transnational Erotic Desires,” Min Joo Lee analyzes the phenomenon of western women traveling to Korea in order to seek nonsexual romantic relationships with Korean men. Lee argues that these women believe Korean men to be romantic and nonsexual based on their viewing of Korean TV dramas; their (nonsexual) desire for Korean men simultaneously represents their own rejection of compulsory sexuality while also reinforcing racist and Orientalist stereotypes about Korean men’s sexuality. Next, Nathan Snaza, in “Asexuality and Erotic Biopolitics,” reflects on his own reading and desire practices to offer an erotic rethinking of asexuality as not only a sexual orientation but also a “queer orientation to sexuality.” Finally, in “Incels, Compulsory Sexuality, and Fascist Masculinity,” Casey Ryan Kelly and Chase Aunspach provide an asexual study of the hateful, white supremacist, and misogynist incel movement and its investment in compulsory sexuality.

To cap off the issue, we also include a review of a book that, although not solely on asexuality, is fruitfully read in dialogue with asexuality studies. Sam Kizer discusses M. Remi Yergeau’s *Authoring Autism: On Rhetoric and Neurological Queerness* (2017) as a book instrumental in considering autism as a queering of rhetoric that dialogues with the ways in which asexuality also queers rhetoric and that speaks to the intersectionalities between autistic and asexual identifications.

Here we note some additional gaps in this special issue. Although important work has been done on thinking about relationalities and kinship from Indigenous perspectives, we have not seen asexuality studies fully engage with

this body of work. Scholars including Qwo-Li Driskill (2004), Tiffany Lethabo King (2019), Tracy Bear (2016), and Mark Rifkin (2012) have all touched on the erotic in thinking about decolonial and Indigenous kinship, intimacy, and relating, challenging the settler colonial composition of queer and feminist studies. For example, Driskill (2004) uses *Sovereign Erotics* and Bear (2016) *eroticanalysis* and *Indigenous erotics* to reference Indigenous self-determination in relating and sexuality. Whereas these four authors use erotics in varying ways, we as coeditors are drawn to the ways that *Sovereign Erotics* opens up beyond sexual relating and includes close and intimate bonds and kin networks that do not include sex. Rifkin, for instance, writes that “the erotic . . . speaks to a sense of embodied and emotional wholeness that includes but extends beyond the scenes and practices of sexual pleasure and gratification usually termed sexual” (2012, 27). This relates as well to Indigenous worldviews of *All My Relations* that consider kinship as extending throughout one’s community and Nation, to other communities and Nations, and to all living and animate beings, including nonhuman animals. The exciting conversations to be had between Indigenous and asexuality studies—or more accurately, an Indigenous asexuality studies—have yet to happen. Similarly, connections between asexuality and trans studies are critical, and although the works in these pages are trans-affirmative, there is nothing focused primarily on this intersection. Again, much more needs to be done in terms of linking trans and asexuality together.

Together, the poetry, review, articles, and art in this special issue hone asexually-centric ways of analyzing intimacy and relating. They present us with modes of analysis that are receptive to and engaged with asexuality studies as well as, to a lesser extent, aromanticism. The dynamic arrangement of the contributions to this issue also demands that asexuality be thought of intersectionally, always interrogating compulsory sexuality and romance’s role in racialization, geographic location, gender, ability, and sexuality. We invite readers to think with the contributors of these pieces and with asexuality studies scholars in general about the ways in which we are called to build love and community and to celebrate the intellectual contributions of asexuality studies.

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Press, 2019) and coeditor of *Queer Feminist Science Studies: A Reader* (University of Washington Press, 2017), as well as the author of a number of peer-reviewed articles and chapters on asexuality.

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Notes

1. Black feminist scholarship on citationality politics has evinced how detrimental it can be to thief knowledge from marginalized fields and communities, as well as how very easy it is to do when a field or community is marginalized, perpetuating the cycle of invisibilization (*Cite Black Women* 2017; Edmonds 2019).

2. On racialization, see Gupta (2015); Owen (2014); Owen (2018); Lang (2018); Miles (2019); Przybylo (2019b). On ability, see Barounis (2014); Bertilsdotter-Rosqvist and Jackson-Perry (2020); Bush et al. (2020); Gupta (2014); Kim (2010); Kim (2011); Kim (2014); Lund and Johnson (2015). On gender, see Cuthbert (2019); Gupta (2019); Przybylo (2014); Sumerai et al. (2018). On geographic location, see Batričević and Cvetić (2016); Kim (2017); Kobayashi (2017); Kurowicka and Przybylo (2019); Przybylo (2019a); QueenieOfAces (2014); Wong (2015). Additionally, for work on asexuality and kink, see Sloan (2015) and Winter-Gray and Hayfield (2019), and for asexuality and aging see Przybylo (2019b).

3. In 2019, Ela Przybylo and KJ Cerankowski co-organized the “Unthinking Sex, Imagining Asexuality: Intersectional and Interdisciplinary Perspectives” conference at Simon Fraser University’s Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue in Vancouver, British Columbia, located on unceded Coast Salish Territory, the traditional territories of Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh First Nations. The full conference program is available online at <https://asexuality.wixsite.com/conference>.

4. For the full CFP, see <https://biopoliticalphilosophy.com/2019/02/11/cfp-the-erotics-of-nonsexualities-intersectional-approaches-deadline-aug-19-2019/>.

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